



The Avon Land Trust, Inc.

Quarterly E-Newsletter, Spring 2022

Welcome townsfolk to our Spring 2022 edition E-newsletter. Isn't it wonderful to enjoy warm weather, see flowers blooming, and the return of wildlife? We hope you will enjoy ALT News & Events with our organization's goings-on and the articles that follow.

Please 'like' us on our Facebook page which can be accessed at: www.facebook.com/avonlandtrust/ We would love to hear from you! And contact Rick Dubiel or Bob Breckenridge, co-presidents, for questions or to volunteer at: trustavonland@gmail.com

ALT NEWS & EVENTS

- **Guest Speakers!** The Avon Land Trust, in partnership with the Avon Free Public Library arranged several guest speakers. Jay Kaplan gave an excellent presentation on "Changing Landscape, Changing Wildlife". Nature poet George Kinder also presented.
- **Fully On Board!** We are pleased to announce that three new members have joined our Board of Directors: Dave Thomas, Len Oremland, and David Whitney. All of them hit the ground running, and have already contributed their unique skills to advance the various land trust causes.
- **Do a Good Deed Daily!** Eagle Scout candidate Gabriel DaCunha has made excellent progress building a puncheon (raised wooden walkway) on one of our trails, which will help hikers immensely in the decades ahead to cross a muddy stretch.
- **For the Birds!** Our Oakes Preserve is recognized by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology as a premier birdwatching site. We are happy to welcome our usual avian residents back this spring, from wood ducks, common mergansers, great blue heron, to Canada geese. This year we have a new colony of 5-6 tree swallows, and put up two more nest boxes for them. All nest boxes were cleaned back in late winter, and the majority showed signs of nesting activity the prior season.
- **Approach the Bench:** A new bench was installed on the Revernolls spur trail at Oakes Preserve, overlooking the brook.
- **Roll 'em!** Our Oakes Preserve wildlife web cam is back in action, after some mice took up residence where they didn't belong during the winter.
Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6v3CSCI_SH0
- **Happy Anniversary!** The Avon Land Trust will celebrate its 50th Anniversary in 2023, and our Historian Laureate Janet M. Conner has been very busy composing a small booklet to commemorate the event.
- **We'll Grant you That!** The Avon Land Trust recently submitted a grant request that would enable us to clean up and rehabilitate one of our parcels along the Farmington River. Fingers crossed!
- **Acquisitive Minds!** The Land Trust has two new land acquisitions in the works. Fingers Crossed!

History Beneath Our Feet

If I Had A Backhoe...

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



This pile of rocks was formerly a distillery site.
Photo credit: Janet M. Conner, Avon Land Trust, Inc.

As a local historian, I have learned much about the towns of Farmington and Avon. When I first moved to Avon 23 years ago, I just saw buildings and trees. Now I can 'see' into the past when I look around, and I know the names of the early settlers who owned homes, if they are still standing, or what the old businesses were back in the day. I can look at historical maps to see what used to be there, if there is now a newer building, or an empty space. There is a map dating to 1710 of the First Subdivisions of Avon, which was actually Northington at that time. This map shows the names of people who mostly lived in Farmington proper, but pastured livestock here. As mills were put into operation, there began to be more widespread settlement.

Public historians speak often about the 'built environment'. This is what people have constructed - homes, barns, offices, buildings, highways, etc. on the landscape. Now, as helpful to us historians as it is to still have remnants of the early built environment, many of these relics of the past are long gone. I muse about what I might find if I could dig on sites where I know there used to be something of interest. What about if I went digging in East Avon where, way back in 1790, there was a 'clothier's works' that dyed wool using blue indigo in vats. I wonder if I dug deep enough, would the earth turn blue?

What if I could dig where an old blacksmith shop used to be? In our town, there were at least a half a dozen of smithies in the various early sections of town. Would I find forged horseshoes, tongs, nails, or door hinges? What about the old gristmill, sawmill and turning mill sites? These were run by water power, and therefore located near a stream with a mill pond. I often think about what if I could dredge these mill ponds to see if I could find the old millstones. They were too heavy to just cart off, so unless you sold them, they might well be sitting in the pond muck!



Piles of apples in front of Ben Miller's cider mill, aka distillery on Waterville Road (Source: CTDA)

Our town, like many in the olden days, had a few distilleries. I imagine if I could excavate these sites, I would find metal barrel staves from the wooden barrels the cider and hard cider was kept in, artifacts from the apple pressing machinery, and perhaps some glass shards from bottles in which the hooch, uh, hard cider was sold.

The land in the now town of Avon, was recognized long ago as a place for settlement. It had abundant natural woodland resources for building homes, barns, and firewood. There were streams to run mills, alluvial soil meadowland, and fertile soil for farmland. With careful town planning and development, and engaged citizens, Avon has

retained much of its natural resources, woodlands, wetlands, and open space, and maintained its inherent beauty. The Avon Land Trust works in partnership with the Avon Historical Society and the Town of Avon to preserve land and its history. I still like to daydream about what it looked like here three hundred years ago, and what lies beneath the soil.

If the Woods Could Talk

Hour Glass Trees

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



Up until the early 1900s Avon was still rural, with a large portion of woodlands having been cleared for crops and homesteads. I like to think of some of our Town's remaining old trees as 'hour glass' trees, marking the passage of time as the sand filters through history. Take the one in the photo above for example. This tree was formerly on the grounds of the Pine Grove School House, c. 1865, in the Pine Grove Historic District in West Avon. Sadly, this tree was damaged in a storm about a year ago, and had to be sawn down. By its girth, it was surely over a hundred years old, and there is still a companion tree standing nearby...for now.

In the 'Connecticut Notable Trees' database, (<http://oak.conncoll.edu:8080/notabletrees/TreesByTown.jsp>) there are seventeen trees that have been added to Avon's list. These are ones that have been reported to the *Notable Tree Project* sponsored, in part, by The Connecticut College Arboretum. Most of these trees have been identified by citizens through hiking on trails, walking, and being observant while visiting places around town. There are volunteers who also monitor these special trees by recording data on their heights and circumferences. On the website listed above, under contact us in lefthand toolbar, is the name of the representative for Avon to whom you can report any trees you think might qualify for this database or email the sponsor. Some trees qualify because of their scarcity, age, height, span, and circumference.

I have always loved trees and have been known to hug a couple. I think they are beautiful and I am pained when our Town loses one of these old gentlemen. Some historic trees, are known as "witness trees" because they just happened to be rooted on a spot where a historical event took place or a connection to a historical person. Therefore, they were *present* physically and metaphorically 'observed' these events happen. I think, in a whimsical way, about what these elderly trees in Avon observed in their lifetimes. They stood by as our Town developed from a farming community to a bedroom community; from having rudimentary technology to going high tech in just the preceding century. So don't mind me if I shed a tear to myself when we lose one of those stately pillars of wood. My lifelong love of Nature and woodlands, was a strong motivational factor for me to join the Avon Land Trust. I whole-heartedly support their mission of land acquisition for conservation and preservation in perpetuity, while simultaneously protecting habitat. If you feel the same way, we are always welcoming like-minded citizens! Volunteering, membership dollars and donations, contribute to keeping Avon bucolic.

Photo credit: Janet M. Conner, ALT

Avon Flora and Fauna

An Acre of Biodiversity

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



I reside on an acre of property, with about a third of the land being woodland, a third grassland, and the last third our house. Our land has an old stonewall, a vestige of the farming days as a boundary marker no doubt, as the yard slopes downhill toward the East. This was a completely wooded acre when we purchased it, however, trees had to be sacrificed for the footprint of the house. Immediately we planted a dozen hardwood trees in the backyard (photo above) to replace some of those lost, and decided to leave the 'back 40', as I call it fallow. This area has rich soil from decades of leaf litter and dead trees. It grows very tall weeds, underbrush, and a few wildflowers. There is scant actual suburban grass on our yard, being too shaded from the trees, so 85% is velvety green moss!

The tree species on our land are white pine, hemlock, dogwood, silver maple, pin oak, white birch, river birch, redbud, white oak, red maple, blue spruce, and a now dead chestnut. The understory of our woods has some mountain laurel, ferns, Virginia creeper, and saplings hoping to compete for some sun. There is no natural water source on the property, however, in a really wet Spring, the low-lying area in the southeast corner will retain water for a short period of time. Natural food sources for wildlife include acorns, pinecones, birch pollen catkins, seeds from maple tree samaras, clover, dandelions, broadleaf plantain, and assorted fungi. We buy certain kinds of shrubs and flowers to attract butterflies, hummingbirds, bees, and deer, unintentionally!

The wildlife our little acre supports, by both regulars and those passing through, is impressive. We've had fawns born in the back 40 because it offers the doe great seclusion. We also have had red fox, bobcat, skunk, wild turkey, black bear, black and gray squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, opossum, voles, mice, and deer. Of the avian variety, we have hawks, owls, dark-eyed juncos, blue jays, cardinals, goldfinch, robins, house sparrows, flickers, hairy-woodpecker, occasional pileated woodpecker, and ruby-throated hummingbirds. In the amphibian category, we have American toads, Northern green frogs, wood frogs, leopard frogs, red-spotted newt, redback salamander, and an infrequent snake.

The point of this dissertation on my yard's flora and fauna, is to demonstrate how just one acre of land can be valuable habitat for wildlife. Trees provide nesting sites for birds and squirrels to build nests and those who bore into the dead trees. Flowering trees and shrubs provide pollen for bees and nectar for butterflies. These pollinators play a vital role in the ecosystem. We have left a downed tree in our border woodland for insects. We also leave some branch piles far away from the house as cover for wildlife.



Our backyard has been certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a 'Backyard Wildlife Habitat'. We even have a sign...see photo! This means that our property meets the criteria to support wildlife by providing natural food sources, water (birdbaths), cover from predators, and creates places for raising young. By virtue of the description above of all the wildlife that our little corner of Avon provides, I hope you will think about your own properties. Perhaps there are some ideas you have gleaned here to assist wildlife in their survival. This Spring, consider eco-friendly products for your yard, put up a nesting box on one of your trees, or add a birdbath if you don't mind the bears taking a drink too!

The Avon Land Trust stewards almost 300 of land. Based on this article, imagine how much plant and wildlife habitat we are preserving!

Avon's Natural Resources

Ephemeral Vernal Pools

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



Wetlands next to Chidsey Brook (right) on Avon Land Trust's Scoville Road property. (Photo credit: Janet M.

Vernal pools fill with water from Winter through Spring but they can dry completely in Fall and Summer months, as they are shallow. Vernal pools are an important component to the ecological health of habitats as they spawn food for wildlife. The Connecticut DEEP website states that "...under Connecticut law, vernal pools, which contain a specific ecology, are one type of vernal watercourse, and Connecticut's municipal inland wetlands agencies regulate any activities that are likely to impact or affect vernal waterbodies."

In reading some historical newspaper articles, I have found mention of vernal pools in our town. One is on Deercliff Road. In a 1989 *Hartford Courant* article, Jay Kaplan, Director of the Roaring Brook Nature Center, remarked that this vernal pool is "...probably the most productive breeding ground for amphibians in the Farmington Valley area, in terms of diversity and numbers."

Mr. Kaplan noted that hundreds of frogs, toads, and rare salamander rely on this water source every year. Fortunately, the Avon Land Trust acquired a property there containing 7 acres in 1994 from a developer. This parcel has a marsh on it known as Hart Meadow Marsh. This is a non-tidal marsh, also known as a vernal pool.

Our Town is very fortunate to have municipal partners looking out for the best interests of the environment and its residents. These include the Inland Wetlands Commission and the Planning and Zoning Commission. There have been many instances of developers proposing subdivisions that would infringe on natural wetlands, including marshes, bogs, and vernal pools. Great care is given in considering developer's applications. Our Town now requires developers to donate 10% percent of their parcels as a condition of being granted permission for development, or to make an equivalent financial contribution to the Open Space Fund. Proposed lands are evaluated by professionals to assess soils, drainage, and aquifers, or intrusion on wetlands, woodlands, grasslands, habitat, etc. Sometimes the Town receives this land to retain as open space, and sometimes the Avon Land Trust is selected as the recipient. Town land *can* be developed or left as open space, whereas, land donated to the Avon Land Trust is preserved perpetually.

Preserving our wetlands, including vernal pools, is a natural resource that while seasonal and fleeting, is an important component in our Town's ecology. Each Spring, I look forward to putting down my car windows as I drive on Woodmont Road, just before it transitions into Juniper Road. This road connector bisects wetlands now known as Red Mountain Lane Open Space on the north side, and Juniper Road Open Space on the south side. As I drive along, I LOVE the sound of the Spring peeper frogs - truly music to my ears!



THE AVON LAND TRUST HISTORY AND MISSION STATEMENT

The Avon Land Trust was founded on May 23, 1973 in order to conserve and hold in trust the natural resources of the Town of Avon – woodlands, fields, lakes, rivers, open spaces and the plant and animal life living therein.

By doing so we hope to retain the natural charm of our town. Future generations may not remember our names, but they will certainly be glad we were here.

Mission: - To preserve and protect undeveloped land in Avon- By doing so, to enhance our town's scenic beauty and it's environmental and historic resources. - To promote the conservation and management of woodlands and open space. - To acquire through donations and purchases additional land which can be preserved in it's natural state. - To maintain wildlife habitats on said properties. - To provide public access to appropriate properties and in so doing provide public enjoyment of nature. - To actively seek wetlands, woodlands meadowlands and ridgeland which have unique scenic, historic, scientific and ecological significance for Avon.